DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 801 CS 502 497

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TITLE American Views of the Cultural Imperialism Charge.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Sydney College for Advanced Education Colloquium for Scholars Conference (Linfield, Australia, March 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Foreign Countries; Information Dissemination; *Information Sources; *International Relations; *Mass Media; *News Media; *Press Opinion; Telecommunication; Television
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

The United States is a major exporter but a minor importer of films and television programs; this situation has been described as a one-way flow of information from the United States to other nations. Although the official United States position is one of dedication to the two-way flow of communication, the "majority" view is that the media offerings of the United States are made available in a free marketplace and, under most circumstances, the free dissemination of information should not be restricted. The charge of "cultural imperialism" has been laid at the door of the Western media, particularly that of the United States; this view is accepted by the "minority" position, while the "majority" position views this charge as an attempt by certain governments to use the language of cultural emancipation to silence political opposition and minority viewpoints. (DF)

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AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM CHARGE

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CS 502 497

Presented at Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education,
Eton Road, Lindfield 2070, Australia.

29th March, 1979

ONE EXPRESSION OF THE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM CHARGE:

"This situation of dependence is seen by many, including some television administrators, as unsatisfactory. Some protest that this influx of alien cultural material undermines attempts to build a Caribbean culture, that it poses a significant threat to Caribbean cultural identity and that it demonstrates to us alien life-styles which result in increasing our desire for luxuries we cannot afford and do not need."

--- Everold Hosein, "The Problem of Imported Television Content in the Commonwealth Caribbean," Caribbean Quarterly, 22 No. 4 (December, 1976) p. 8.

Introduction

My personal introduction to this topic was in early 1974 when I visited Australia. I wanted to see what was happening in the Australian film industry and I had an opportunity to talk with people in the media and at the Film School. Later that year, in October, I attended a Broadcast Education Conference in Washington D. C. in which the theme of the conference was International Broadcasting. The featured speakers included Art Kane, president of Viacom, Leonard Marks, a prominent Washington lawyer in communication and foreign relations matters and a former director of the United States Information Agency, and Sig Mickelson, ex-CBS and Time-Life corporations, and then affiliated with Northwestern University. The conference met under the auspices of the National Association of Broadcasters. A large number of academics were in attendance. I think that it would be a fair comment to make that the conference was one of government-industry-establishment type. One lone academic, Tom Guback from Indiana University who is the author of the definitive study of the International Film Trade, provided a differing perspective to the main thrust of the conference.

It was not just the president of Viacom whose organization exports perhaps more telefilm than any other in the world, who projected a particular view of the cultural imperialism situation, but it was the accepted tone of the conference. This picture has been painted by an article from U.S. News and World Report: "Made-in-U.S. TV a Hit Around the World,"[1] and describes the status quo as the right, natural, indeed the best possible state-of-affairs. I would call this the majority view.

When Harry Irwin gave me the topic of this colloquium, "American Views on the Cultural Imperialism Charge," I was a little bemused as, of course, I can't pretend to have any definitive description of specifically American views on anything. All sorts of views are available in the United States ---but I can describe the views I encountered and those, I think, that predominate in the various sectors of society. Also, I can cite some of the relevant literature in the field. Anyway, the U.S. News Article from April 1978, exemplifies one view, certainly the view that prevailed at that conference in 1974. Essentially, it is that television programming, news and entertainment, is a product of the free marketplace and no one should stop its free dissemination under any, or at least, most circumstances. In fact, Americans should be proud that they have done so well in the past, and should try harder to get out more of the American product to the rest of

the world. This is the prevalent attitude and one which politicians unabashedly proclaim. Governor Jerry Brown of California (although I can't give you the citation at the moment) but I think it is from Esquire magazine, has waxed eloquent about the ability of the Hollywood product to circle the globe and bring back dollars from the raw material of dreams.

It has been a personal observation that Americans are much more likely to accept a "freedom of the marketplace" argument than are Australians. Unions, for example, are not nearly as integrated into the populace in America as in Australia. Roughly a quarter of the American work-force is unionized, whereas well over half the Australian work-force belongs to a union. Thus a union in the United States appears as one of the many special interest groups, yet in Australia the union would more likely be identified as "we" in a polarized issue. Also the Australian constitution specifically recognizes a place for binding arbitration in settling industrial disputes. Such ideas would seem strange to many Americans. Australians have a long tradition of national and state ownership of trains, banking, airlines, electricity suppliers, telecommunications and broadcasting, whereas Americans consider corporate ownership as the norm.

Americans have a unique clause in their constitution in that the First Amendment forbids congress to make any law abridging press freedom. The Australian constitution, a much later document, treats of many things such as religion, railways, and intoxicating drinks, but makes no mention of press freedoms as such. Australian libel laws were such that the exposé of the Watergate affair would not have been likely in that the newspapers could have been constrained much more strictly than their American counterparts were. Thus the two nations live in different media worlds, in spite of the apparent similarity, there are deep underlying differences in press and information policy and indeed philosophy.

Professor Guback, whose opinions are included in the famous UNESCO sponsored study that started the academic debate, the Nordenstreng-Varis thesis of the international flow of television program material: "Television Traffic: A One-Way Street?"[2] gave a carefully reasoned presentation to the academics who attended the conference. His views, which seemed to be derived from a different ideological perspective from the others, described the deleterious effects of the one-way flow. A government spokesman from Canada also gave a presentation which outlined the Canadian government's

efforts aimed at stemming the influx of American material into Canada.

My own report to the group was simply relating of the recent events which had occurred in Australia up to that time and would provide no new information to an Australian media scholar. It included: the points system in Broadcasting to encourage indigenous production, the establishment of the Television-Film School and the subsidization of Australian films and similar matters. This was later reported in Feedback, (the BEA journal) and the Journal of Communication.[3]

The response I received was a great revelation to me. One of the BEA officers who was running the conference on International Broadcasting hadn't heard of the Nordenstreng thesis or that there was any resistance to the flow of information. He asked for the citation of the Nordenstreng article. A group of about five were about to start a study debunking Nordenstreng. The main criticism of the thesis was that it tabulated hours of programming, and gave no audience figures nor cash flow. Remember, this was two years after the vote in the General Assembly of the United Nations concerning the use of direct broadcast satellites. (In 1972, 102 nations voted to direct the Political Committee to devise a set of principles for control of the satellite. The United States was the only nation voting for no control over the satellite).[4]

I recall talking to Wilson Dizard at lunch at the conference. His was a pioneering study on the flow of American television programming and has been quoted by several polemical Australian articles. He said, "the greatest no-holds-barred market for U.S. telefilm distribution is Australia. The daily schedule of a typical Australian television station is, particularly in prime listening hours, virtually indistinguishable from that of a station in Iowa or New Jersey."[5] As far as most attendees at the BEA conference were concerned that's right and natural. That's the way things should be.

However, at the BEA conference there were quite a few who were troubled by the charge. I remember Sig Mickelson saying to me during the conference that wherever he travelled in Europe the main topic of conversation was the one-way flow problem. That was in 1974.

The view that I have described as prevalent in 1974 was still doing well in 1978. The most typical recent statement is Rosemary Righter's Whose News? Politics, the Press and the Third World.[6] Although her book

is published in England, its views are genuinely transatlantic, and agree with Abshire[7] and Rubin[8] and other American writers on this topic.

I shall quote from her work to describe her arguments.

Firstly, she describes the cultural imperialism charge, and explains why its protagonists reject the "freedom of information" idea:

> Freedom, on this reading, is a suspect word...freedom---whether of the individual, of trade, of cultural exchange or of the flow of information---is also rejected as a fraud. The concept, it is argued, has simply enabled the rich and powerful to impose their views and their market economies on vulnerable countries, to further the interests of their highly profitable multinational business enterprises, and to subject economic and social development to the requirements of a privileged Western minority. Choice, in this view, is merely the freedom of the many to take one of several brands of the wrong medicine. And the medicine must be 'wrong' because it is brewed in an alien culture.[9] These arguments are as persuasive as they are circular.

Righter goes on to say that the third world's attach on the international media is based on three arguments. Firstly, they are too powerful. Secondly, they are alien. Thirdly, they lack the attributes of accuracy and objectivity on which they base their claims of pre-eminence.[10] She later explains that:

> the fiercest critics are generally governments some of whose members are using the language of cultural emancipation to increase state control and to silence both political opposition and awkward minority viewpoints. Many quite openly assert that they do not believe in the value of free speech.[11]

The minority American view is given by Professor Schiller. Righter describes Herbert Schiller's views as Marxist, and quotes one of his arguments:

> By emphasising facilities, the U.S. hopes at the international level to see that 'the larger and fundamental issue of total systemic dependence including the quality of the information produced and provided, remains unaddressed and out of sight.' (Schiller's emphasis).[12]

Although to some Australian observers Schiller's observation might have some relevance regarding the report by the Radio Corporation of America's engineer Donald S. Bond entitled "The Opportunity for Television Program Distribution in Australia using Earth Satellites,"[13] because we know the arguments raised by opponents to the implementation of the subsequent White report.[14] Schiller, however, does not get a sympathetic hearing by Ms. Righter.

According to Ms. Righter:

> Schiller's work Communication and Cultural Domination must be one of the worst written and worst argued books on almost any intellectual subject.[15]

The Flow of Television Materials

Since late 1978 when the UNESCO general conference in Paris voted to accept a declaration which ostensibly affirmed Western-style press freedoms, some of the pressure seems to be off the Anglo-American bloc to "do something" about the "cultural imperialism" or "one way flow of television programming" charges. That vote was the result of intense lobbying by Western interests, yet for a while it seemed that the vote would go the other way.[16] This issue, which is now part of what has become well known as the "new world information order," may seem to be less of a crisis at the moment, but the underlying tensions remain and will undoubtedly capture press attention again, perhaps at the upcoming World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) this year. The conflict can now be seen as a chronic one, and will undoubtedly be of perennial interest to the communication scholar, and perhaps more so to the political scientist or even the political philosopher.

Certainly it is important to the observer of Australian relations with the United States as the two nations exemplify the world situation just between themselves. America is the great exporter and Australia is the great importer of television programs and other cultural artifacts. Because the perspectives of the two nations toward the flow phenomenon differ, it is necessary to look at each of the perspectives, starting with an official American perspective.

An American Perspective

While the United States is often viewed as being solely concerned with the export of programming, as we have discussed, it is important to realize that the official United States government position, as expressed by Barry Jagoda, President Carter's Special Assistant for Communication, is a dedication to the two-way flow of communication.[17] Whether or not the official position is ritual cant, the threat to American interests of many foreign attitudes and policies is undoubtedly perceived as real as a report to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee entitled "The New Information Order" authoritatively maintained.[18]

The question of sovereignty and the flow of information was posed as an important one for the United States, especially as the Less Developed Countries controlled the balance of votes in upcoming international councils (e.g., International Telecommunications Union/World Administrative Radio Conference) which have long-range importance to national defense and commerce. The long-standing Soviet efforts to promote a UNESCO declaration on the responsibility of government to control media is attractive to many persons in LDC's who arrive at the conclusion without necessarily sharing Soviet ideology. Also, the report claimed, "To begin to overcome the fear of being overwhelmed by outside media, many of the nonaligned, taking a cue from northern nations like Canada, now limit the number of Western-produced films and/or TV programs that can be shown locally."[19] The report also pointed out that there is a "tentative, but unsubstantiated, view among Western observers" that the flow of news from Western nations to the receiving nations is not as negative as the LDC's claim, but "this hasn't been studied to any great extent."

Traditionally, other nations have had difficulty in distributing their films and television programs to the American domestic market. Today, however, with the challenge of "The New Information Order," there is a pertinent question which has been succinctly stated by Jeremy Tunstall in his recent study The Media are American: "Can the United States continue to be an exception to the general rule that major media exporters are also major media importers?" [20] For example, Australia has in the past few years made a concerted national effort to check, or ever reverse, at least in some measure, this perceived one-way flow.[21] Australia has subsidized film production, used American actors, and encouraged indigenous television production. Because variables such as language and political institutions are relatively constant, Australia may well be viewed as a test case, for the rest of the world's production areas, to see if a two-way flow of communication can be initiated with the United States. Australia is significant in this instance also, because it has rivalled Canada as the largest importer (in dollar volume terms) of American television programs and motion pictures. In the words of a chairman of the UNESCO conference on communication policies, "Communication is development. It is also power."[22] Thus the stakes are seen by political leaders as being of a very high order indeed.

Tunstall claims that "Australians are free of the taint of being either British or American imperialists, and yet they are on the Anglo-American team."[23] He sees the importance of Australian influence on the LDC's as twofold.

Direct influence is exemplified as "Australia broadcasts heavily to Indonesia and south-east Asia," and secondly, Australia shares common interests with other smaller countries in that "the resentment of the 1960's against excessive media imports has quickened in the 1970's."[24] Gunaratne also gives a description of Australian influence in world media councils that pertains directly to LDC media aspirations.[25] Thus, both because Australia is a dollar earner for the United States in that she imports American programs, and because Australia can influence world markets is she of economic interest to the United States. The possibility of a genuine two-way flow of programming is also at least of academic interest.

News and Entertainment Programs

Let us make a distinction between the information flow from television news broadcasts and entertainment and other programs, although it must be admitted, that these are merely different expressions of the same underlying phenomenon.

News Broadcasts

There is a widespread American sensitivity about the importance of the source of information, especially when that source is foreign. However, while blatant influence peddling as in the Koreagate scandal captures headlines, this type of influence merely occupies the think-pieces in the press. As illustration, it is necessary to go no further than to quote from an article by John Weisman in America's largest circulation periodical TV Guide. Entitled "Foreign Lobbyists: How They Try to Manipulate U.S. Television," this 'special report' outlines British, Iranian, South African, Philippine and other national interests influencing American telecasts. Taking the British Case, Weisman reports:

> The British Information Service offers a news spot about Northern Ireland to the three networks' news departments. It is an official government film, promoting the British position in Belfast. ABC and NBC send edited versions of the propaganda film to their affiliates as part of their regular news service.[26]

Weisman then goes on to give facts and figures for the foreign lobbyists. For example, BIS has a $1.6 million budget for its U.S. operation. It employs 45 people, and is, according to Weisman, a thoroughly professional, exceptionally well connected operation.

Another example of long established and deep rooted American sensitivity to media power is from the much quoted autobiography Barriers Down by the then Associated Press Chief Kent Cooper. He complained how a cartel of European press agencies controlled all the news that flowed into and out of the U.S. well into the 1930's:

> It told the world about the Indians on the warpath in the West, lynchings in the South and bizarre crimes in the North...nothing creditable to America ever was sent.[27]

The argument went on into the forties, and in that time when British interests controlled the bulk of the commercial cable traffic, Schiller reported that the British Economist could sniff that the Americans were merely citing libertarian principles to further their economic goals.[28] Today, of course, when America controls the satellites, the picture from the States is painted somewhat differently. Today it is the nations of the Lesser Developed Countries that are complaining of biases and inadequate news coverage, and the LDC's demand a "New World Information Order."

At least one American authority, The Wall Street Journal, sees Australia as "sitting on the fence," and bidding to bridge the gap between the West and the developing nations."[29] The article quotes the former Prime Minister, Mr. Whitlam, and the current Foreign Minister, Mr. Peacock as being in agreement about Australia's role. Australia can mediate between the rich and the poor because, "We aren't a country with a history of imperialism that makes us vulnerable to moral blackmail or subject to guilt." The Journal concludes that: "Australia is white and rich, and its roots are in the West. Yet, like most developing countries, it is a commodities exporter, a capital importer and an inhabitant of the Southern Hemisphere. In an era when resources increasingly are a measure of influence, Australia is suddenly seeing itself as important in its own right, not merely as an appendage to a superpower."

The type of television news that emanates from the United States and comes to Australia seems to be chosen according to standard American television news values although, of course, it is chosen by Australians. One looks vainly for planted self-serving propaganda stories, but one is much more likely to see sensational, bizarre and unusual items. Rather than the propagandist goal of enlightenment and uplift, the "man bites dog" adage seems to apply when the question is asked, "What is newsworthy?" Floods, fires, and aircraft crashes seem to demand priority. These, of course, are

precisely the types of items that the Soviet-LDC block at UNESCO would like to have downplayed or eliminated from the classification of news. Thus the news from the United States to Australia would fit into the description which Rosemary Righter used for the complaints of the LDC's:

> News is selected in accordance with what will sell more of the Daily Beast, sensationalism abounds and reporting reflects the public taste for entertainment and the habit of the 'bad news syndrome.'[30]

By way of illustration of this idea, and certainly not to prove a thesis as much more evidence would have to be sifted for that end, we can take the example of one night of television news from the ABC station in Brisbane in late January, 1979. The sole overseas picture story was expensively transmitted by satellite and concerned the random shooting of elementary school children by a teen-ager in San Diego. Actuality coverage of the dead and wounded were shown on the screen. The girl's reason for the killings was given as boredom, and a desire to be on television. If a contradiction in terms is admissible, this evening telecast might be described as quite a routine news offering from the United States to Australia.

Cultural Imperialism Towards Australia

One succinct definition of "cultural imperialism" is: "Brushing your teeth routinely when you haven't had anything to eat." Although Australians have plenty to eat, Australian media have been brushing away religiously to the Northern hemisphere rhythms for as long as living memory can fathom. The incongruity of Bing Crosby's desire for a White Christmas has long escaped several generations of Australians while they listened to radios on the beach, and Santa Claus in a bikini or on a surf board is, relatively speaking, a very recent arrival on the Australian scene. In February 1979, one can glance at a major Australian daily newspaper and see syndicated comic strips which day after day make seasonal jokes which must totally escape any Australian experience. For example, Bill Keane's The Family Circus emphasises blizzards, putting the children in snow suits, keeping the children inside the house for long periods, all of which simply is outside the experience of Australians. Also, of course, the Summer jokes come in the Australian Winter. Gary Trudeau's Doonesbury demands that one keep up with the American political and sporting scene, and the content must escape the average reader who wouldn't know if the Washington Redskins played football, basketball or hockey.

The Direct Influence of TV Programs

One method of measuring the American influence would be to consider the fifty-four or so American TV programs broadcast in the 1978-9 season.[31] When one obtained the audience for each of these by multiplying the ratings by the number of TV homes, one would have a good estimate of the number of people watching. This would be a somewhat mechanically laborious task, and for the present purposes, an unnecessary one. Most of the American programs appear on the high-rated commercial networks, and undoubtedly attract large viewing audiences. The next largest foreign program source is Britain with thirteen programs, a mere quarter of the number of U.S. imports. It is assumed that if people watch a program they are influenced by it, an assumption, while it is fraught with qualifications, is at the cornerstone of commercial broadcasting. There also seems to be a general consensus that American influence is dominant in Australian television.

Indirect Influences and Failures

While the direct influence is obvious, the indirect influences bear investigation. There are the gross cultural effects which, on the surface may seem to have little to do with television per se, yet which affect the over-all climate of American-Australian relations. American influence on Australian cities is evident from the McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chickens, Pizza Huts and K-Marts which seem to confront the eye at every juncture. Less evident are the goods and services of American origin which failed in the Australian marketplace. For example, ten-pin bowling, introduced in the late fifties, never caught on very well, yet the Australian form of outdoor lawn bowls continues to flourish. This might be attributed to the milder climate in Australia, where large indoor recreation facilities tend not to be as prevalent, nor as economically viable.

Similarly, speech patterns persist tenaciously regardless of the pressures of thousands of television hours listening to American dialects. For example, while the sign at the service station selling an American brand of motor fuel may say, "Discount Gas," the Australian motorist will invariably ask for petrol. There are large numbers of American phrases, some of them undoubtedly regionalisms, which are often culled by scriptwriters in the mass media and so are unknown to Australians. Of course there are a larger

number of Australianisms which do not translate in non-Australian English. Certainly, some American habits of thought, speech, and action which work well in their indigenous setting seem to suffer in transfer to the Australian setting.

One television program which showed its slavish transliteration from the American television meta-language to the Australian version was the much-heralded 60 Minutes.[32] Unfortunately, quality seems to be one of the attributes of the American program which didn't survive the transition. For example, part of the charm of the American program is the interviewer Mike Wallace's badinage with the genuine villains his producers are exposing on any particular week. His style is so well known that the crooked real estate men, diploma mill racketeers, or other specialists in interesting villany, will demur: "Well, Mike, I watch your show and I know that you'll twist my answer. I can't talk to you about that!" There is a sense of well-known ritual, a contest in which the rules are understood, and the game is played partially at any rate, for the sake of the game.

The Australian 60 Minutes premier program used the same ticking clock as the U.S. version, and the first story on buying cigarettes in Queensland and selling them in New South Wales was lifted verbatim from a story of cigarette smuggling into New York State from southern states. Taking an idea is fair enough, as borrowing a story is a time-honoured custom since Shakespeare plagiarized Holinshed. The style, however, wasn't stolen successfully. There was, for example, a sudden intrusion of the camera onto an elderly cigarette salesman who, while breaking no law, and obviously an underling in the enterprise, was startled and distressed to find himself on-camera being interrogated by the brash television reporter playing prosecuting attorney. A Sydney TV producer summed up the unfortunate incident in The National Times: "There is absolutely no justification for playing dirty tricks on innocent people simply to add some spice to an otherwise weak and bland television story."[33] One can only surmise that had Mike Wallace seen that program he would have winced. Quite simply, the cultural ambiance was lacking. One cannot blame the producers if the supply of telegenic bad guys in Australia isn't as plentiful as in the States. The dramatic requirements of the program demand a genuine heavyweight heavy, and while terrorizing the populace with a Candid Camera prankishness might entertain some of the audience, it simply isn't the kind of thing that the American 60 Minutes would do. Clearly, the Australian copy was vastly inferior to the

real thing, and that is surely a form of cultural imperialism.

Efforts to Study the Flow

As far as the flow of television information is concerned, one point of agreement of nearly all parties is that hard evidence from valid data is in short supply.[34] Nordenstreng reported one of his problems:

> The published programme statistics of TV stations---if there were any---were mostly useless for this study since they all employed different systems of classification. Furthermore, they often were designed to impress rather than inform, i.e. the statistical data were treated as another means of sales promotion.[35]

Perhaps the most ambitious study to date is that originated by the International Institute of Communications which operates under the leadership of Lord Briggs, the provost of Worcester College, Oxford. This study recognizes that involved in the information flow are not simply the physical movement of films, videotapes, print material and money, but also the movement of managerial and technical expertise, technology, lifestyles, and social and political viewpoints.

The IIC project, whose director is Professor Peter Gould of Pennsylvania State University, is undertaking a detailed study of program flows in television starting with pilot studies on the Arab world, Latin America and Europe. These studies employ a new methodology, which has been described by Peter Gould.[36] In essence, this methodology consists of using algebraic notation to represent the various flows in the graphic language of a map---a model representing the complexities of the flows in a readily assimilable and useable form.

However, until that information is in, we will have to observe the fascinating phenomenon of the flow of television programs and the concomitant charge of "cultural imperialism" with the tools available to us, and hope that we can get an ever-clearer picture of what it all means.

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